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Statement submitted by Women's Board Educational Cooperation Society, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

Women Empowerment: the link to Sustainable Development

The contribution of women who make more than half the human population cannot be overlooked if we are to achieve sustainable development. The more we empower women of all ages and social backgrounds the more likely we are to attain the development goals by the stipulated year of 2030.

Women empowerment cannot take place without education. The population of women who are meaningfully empowered is dependent on the population that have access to quality education, starting with basic education. In Nigeria, the quality of basic education provided in public funded schools is abysmal. The situation is even worse in rural areas where it is almost non-existent. Very few women from these rural areas are able to defy the odds and scale through to obtaining a higher education or sufficient education for notable empowerment. In the course of our work, we have observed that lack of quality basic education is the major obstacle to empowering women. With quality basic education, training is carried out faster and with more depth.

More than 573 million women and girls worldwide are illiterate, and this is a big setback to sustainable development. Women earnings will grow by 10-20 per cent for every year of school each woman is able to complete. In Nigeria, ensuring that girls spend more years in school is a big issue especially in the north east where girls' schools remain closed after terrorist attacks of Boko haram. Even for those who are still in school the issue of their safety needs to be addressed sufficiently. Recently, some private schools in the western part of the country were attacked and some of their students kidnapped. The social protection of these girls has to be addressed if they are to remain in a formal setting to receive the necessary education which will empower them.

Another aspect of education which should be explored for women empowerment and attainment of the sustainable development goals is informal education. There is a high reliance on different categories of certification which is a result of formal education. Skills acquired informally if recognised will go a long way to empower women and make their contribution to sustainable development recognized and appreciated. This is imperative, considering that most poor women cannot work their way out of poverty except in an informal sector. The average earnings of these women are low, as they are not receiving the full benefit of their contribution to the economy and society.

Informal economy contributes greatly to the economy and in Nigeria this has been estimated at about 7.61trillion Naira. It is sad to note that despite this huge amount of contribution the majority of the people working in this sector live in squalor and their contribution remain largely unvalued, unrecognised and hardly taken into account both in urban and rural planning. If we are to achieve sustainable development without leaving anyone behind, then it is imperative that informal workers who are the working poor, need to be recognised, valued and supported as economic agents who contribute greatly to the growth and development in the society.

The role of government cannot be over emphasised when it comes to recognition of informal sector. Government should declare a state of emergency when it comes to women education and empowerment especially for those women that are poor and need to acquire skills in order to increase their employability. Government and civil society should organise massive training towards skills acquisition.

In the course of our work in the field of vocational training we have seen how the income of a young girl redefines the livelihood of an entire household. With the little earned by such a girl, the family is able to feed and even train some of their members.

The major challenge to achieving even greater height to women empowerment is a lack of proper recognition of informal and semi-formal training. Once there is no recognition there are no proper guidelines both for remuneration and ensuring that certain standards are met.

Take for instance in the field of hospitality a girl who does not have a formal qualification from a higher institution may be more skilled than a person with formal education in the same field with a certification from a higher institution. But because our economy is orientated towards certificate obtained though formal education rather than competency in skills required for the job, the person with the skill is more recognized and remunerated more than the other. There is nothing wrong with getting a degree from a university, but many times, such degrees are theory based with little hands on practical experience. Unfortunately, since only a formal education degree is well valued and recognised, it happens most times that a woman with informal training could earn thrice lower even in spite of higher skill knowledge than the person with formal education in the same field.

The Nigerian Government has recently taken steps towards the recognition of informal training by the introduction of the National Skill Qualification Framework. With the National Skill Qualification Framework, the worker is able to acquire certification for competency at any level through formal, semi-formal or informal learning. Nigeria has only recently joined many other countries that already have an existing framework or are in the process of implementing the framework. The system is a framework which enables the development, classification and recognition of skills, knowledge and competencies acquired by individuals, irrespective of where and how the training or skill was acquired.

Apart from the proper recognition of skills of poor workers, the system also encourages continuous learning since it gives a clear statement of what the learner must know or be able to do whether the learning takes place in a classroom or on-the-job. The framework indicates the comparability of different qualifications and how one can progress from one level to another. The skills recognition through the National Skill Qualification Framework is a fantastic way of empowering women because it helps the poor (majority of who are women) gain an up-to-date Nationally Recognised Qualification.

We find it highly necessary for the government to push for greater recognition of informal education in order for the contribution made by the informal sector, especially the women who make up a majority of the people in the sector to be recognized and appreciated.